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Albania

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OVERVIEW:

Polarization and deadlock between the ruling Democratic Party (PD) and opposition Socialist Party (PS) intensified in 2011, further damaging Albania's bid for European Union candidate status. In January, a corruption scandal forced the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta and triggered opposition protests, during which four demonstrators were shot and killed. In municipal elections in May, a PD candidate won the crucial mayoralty of Tirana by a razor-thin margin after a highly politicized legal battle. At year's end, both Meta's trial and investigations into the January shootings remained unresolved.

Ruling from World War II until his death in 1985, communist dictator Enver Hoxha turned Albania into the most isolated country in Europe. The regime began to adopt more liberal policies in the late 1980s, and multiparty elections in 1992 brought the Democratic Party (PD), led by Sali Berisha, to power. Continuing poverty and corruption, along with unrest after the collapse of large-scale investment scams, resulted in the election of a new government led by the Socialist Party (PS) in 1997.

Former president Berisha returned to government as prime minister after the PD won the 2005 parliamentary elections. In 2007, the parliament elected PD candidate Bamir Topi as the country's president.

Berisha's government was plagued by allegations of corruption and abuse of office in 2008. Nevertheless, in June 2009 parliamentary elections, the PD took 68 of 140 seats and formed a coalition government with four smaller parties that collectively held seven seats. The PS, in opposition with 65 seats, claimed fraud and boycotted the new parliament. Although the PS finally named a deputy parliament speaker and committee members in June 2010, it continued to mount protests and block key legislative votes that required a three-fifths majority.

In January 2011, the media aired a video recording that showed Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta apparently discussing corrupt deals involving a hydropower tender. The PS mounted a large protest in Tirana on January 21, and four demonstrators were shot and killed, allegedly by Republican Guards protecting the prime minister's office. Dozens of protesters and police were injured in related clashes. Prosecutor General Ina Rama launched an investigation into the deaths, but her efforts were openly obstructed by Berisha, who set up a rival parliamentary inquiry and accused Rama, Topi, the PS, the intelligence service, and leading journalists of orchestrating an attempted coup. The prime minister promised financial rewards for those who agreed to testify in the parliamentary probe. By year's end, neither inquiry had made significant progress, and Meta's corruption trial was still under way.

Meanwhile, PD candidate Lulzim Basha, who had faced corruption allegations as a cabinet minister, won the Tirana mayoralty in May municipal elections, defeating PS leader and three-term incumbent Edi Rama (no relation to the prosecutor general). After a protracted legal battle over miscast ballots, PD-dominated electoral bodies found that Basha had won by 93 votes out of some 250,000. The PS mounted confrontational protests, boycotted the parliament over the dispute until early September, and continued to wrangle with the PD majority thereafter.

The political deadlock since mid-2009 has obstructed reforms linked to Albania's bid for European Union (EU) candidacy, with EU officials warning that candidate status will not be granted absent substantial progress.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Albania is an electoral democracy. International observers of the 2009 parliamentary elections hailed improvements in a number of areas, but also cited problems including media bias, abuse of state resources, political pressure on public employees, and flaws in the tabulation process. The unicameral, 140-member Kuvendi (Assembly) is elected through proportional representation in 12 regional districts of varying size. All members

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Partly Free

FREEDOM RATING

3.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

3

POLITICAL RIGHTS

3

serve four-year terms. The prime minister is designated by the majority party or coalition, and the president—who does not hold executive powers but heads the military and plays an important role in selecting senior judges—is chosen by the parliament for a five-year term.

The sharp, personality-driven rivalry between the two main political parties, the PD and the PS, escalated significantly in 2011. The campaign for the May municipal elections featured interparty violence—including some nonfatal shootings, bombings, and property damage—as well as party-line decisions, boycotts, and acrimony within the Central Election Commission, and political pressure on public employees. Nevertheless, observers noted improvements on some issues, including abuse of administrative resources and voter-list accuracy.

Corruption is pervasive, and the EU has repeatedly called for rigorous implementation of antigraft measures. Prosecutor General Ina Rama continues to pursue high-level cases with support from U.S. and EU officials, but Prime Minister Sali Berisha has regularly accused her of political bias, and the prosecutions have been thwarted by parliamentary immunity and unfavorable court rulings. In early 2011, Rama filed charges against Ilir Meta, who had resigned as deputy prime minister in January after a video showed him apparently discussing bribery, and against former economy minister Dritan Prifti, who appeared in another incriminating video. Parliamentary immunity was lifted for both men. Meta's trial was under way before the Supreme Court at year's end, though the chief justice failed to recuse herself despite Meta's alleged claims to have influence over her, and key evidentiary rulings during the trial strongly favored the defense. Albania was ranked 95 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent outlets. During the 2011 municipal election campaign, most outlets were seen as biased toward either the PS or the PD. Reporters have little job security and remain subject to lawsuits, intimidation, and in some cases physical attacks by those facing media scrutiny. Several journalists were reportedly assaulted during the protests of January 21, and Berisha's subsequent parliamentary probe briefly sought to question and seize the telephone records of four leading media figures. Berisha's government has placed financial pressure on critical outlets. In September 2011, an appeals court rejected the previous year's \$500,000 judgment against the television station Top Channel, which was accused of illegally obtaining a 2009 video that showed then culture minister Ylli Pango engaging in apparent sexual harassment of a female job applicant. The government does not limit internet access, and internet penetration is estimated at over 43 percent.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and it is usually upheld in practice. The government generally does not limit academic freedom, though students and teachers have faced political pressure ahead of elections.

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. In addition to the deaths and injuries during the January 21 protest, police reportedly beat and detained civilians in its immediate aftermath. However, most of those arrested were quickly released. Subsequent demonstrations by both major parties remained relatively peaceful. Nongovernmental organizations function without restrictions but have limited funding and policy influence. The constitution guarantees workers the rights to organize and bargain collectively, and most have the right to strike. However, effective collective bargaining remains limited, and union members have little protection against discrimination by employers. Hundreds of workers at a chromium mine mounted a three-month strike in July, successfully extracting a pay raise and new investment from the Austrian owner. Child labor is a problem, and informal child workers sometimes face hazardous conditions.

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the underfunded courts are subject to political pressure. Several vacancies on the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court have gone unfilled in the last two years due to disagreements between the president, who nominates the judges for confirmation by the parliament, and the PD majority, which has demanded more influence over the appointments. Judicial immunity obstructs investigations of corruption among the country's poorly paid judges, who also face threats of violence. In September 2011, a district court judge in Vlora was killed in a bomb explosion. High court fees allegedly limit access to justice for ordinary Albanians.

Police reportedly engage in abuse of suspects during arrest and interrogation, and such ill-treatment is lightly if ever punished. Prison inmates suffer from poor living conditions and lack of adequate medical treatment. The parliament filled the vacant human rights ombudsman's position in late December 2011 after nearly two years of deadlock, during which the institution had functioned under an acting leader.

Weak state institutions have augmented the power of crime syndicates. Albania is known as a transshipment point for heroin smugglers and a key site for cannabis production. Traditional tribal law and revenge killings are practiced in parts of the north.

Roma face significant discrimination in education, health care, employment, and housing. In February 2011, local citizens destroyed a settlement of some 45 Romany families near the Tirana train station, forcing residents to flee. Two perpetrators were sentenced for relatively minor offenses. Some tensions persist between the ethnic Greek minority and the ethnic Albanian majority.

A 2010 law bars discrimination based on several categories, including sexual orientation and gender identity, but bias against sexual minorities in society and by law enforcement officials remains strong.

Women are underrepresented in most governmental institutions, and a quota for women in party candidate lists is not well enforced. Domestic violence, which is believed to be widespread, is rarely punished by the authorities. Albania is a source country for trafficking in women and children.

TREND ARROW:

Albania received a downward trend arrow due to the killing of opposition protesters in January, the politicization of electoral mechanisms surrounding municipal balloting in May, and the failure of the courts to impartially adjudicate a corruption case against a senior government politician.

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